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STRAY THOUGHTS ON AMERICAN LITERATURE

BY JAMES BRYCE

HAVING been asked, as an old contributor to THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW, to send a short article to appear in a number commemorative of its centenary, an era in American literary history, I willingly comply because the occasion gives me the chance of conveying felicitations on a long and honorable record, illuminated by great names, to a magazine in whose pages an English writer always found himself in good American company, and from whose management I personally always received every courtesy and consideration. The notice was, however, so short that I am obliged to put together hastily some scattered thoughts on a large subject; a subject, however, which seems appropriate when a leading organ of transatlantic literature is looking back over many years during which that literature has wonderfully expanded. These scattered thoughts must, moreover, be briefly and imperfectly expressed, for the topic is so large that were I to try to elaborate it the article would never get written at all. So I shall try to convey in the simplest fashion what seem to be to me the most conspicuous changes that have passed upon the literary output of the United States during the last forty years, for it is now a little more than forty years since I first began to know THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW.

The first thing which it occurs to me to note is that the relation between American and British literature has become closer. I say "British," not for the sake of including more categorically Scottish and Irish, but because American literature is necessarily "English" in the larger, which is also the truer, sense of the term. All that is written in English, wherever it is written, is English literature because it descends from the same source—*viz.*,

the great writers of the seventeenth century, when the people now politically separated were one people, and because every part of it has continued to affect and mold every other part. To-day people in Britain read books published in America and Americans read books published in Britain, far more generally than was ever the case before. The taste and the criticism of each country are more influenced by that of the other. When living in the United States I was constantly struck by the fact that a new British writer of some fresh quality was often sooner known and more promptly appreciated there than in his own country. The same thing happens, though less markedly, in Great Britain. Thus, as well as through the more frequent personal intercourse, the intellectual touch of the two branches of the old stock has become more intimate, and the immense influx of new immigrants into the United States has not been an adverse force, for in the second generation all are Americans. Certainly the English have become much more curious regarding American life and American problems, more anxious to understand what they feel to be of greater and greater significance to the world as well as to themselves.

As respects what may be called "solid literature," that is to say books on history, philosophy, economics, and all the so-called human or "social" sciences, the greatest change of recent years is the enormously increased American output. The growth of universities in the United States has been without parallel in the world. Small colleges in small towns or rural districts that were forty years ago no more than upper schools have developed into fully equipped institutions of higher teaching. State universities have been established all over the West and South and now receive large annual grants. New universities, like those of Chicago and Leland Stanford in California, have been liberally endowed by private benefactions and possess buildings and a staff comparable to those of Harvard and Columbia, of Michigan and Wisconsin. All these universities have professors of history—some of them several professors, for it is a favorite study. There may be more than two hundred, perhaps three hundred, of such professors in the United States—a number at least three or four times as great as that of those who pursue the study in the United Kingdom. A large proportion of these teachers are not content with teaching, but occupy themselves also with research and publish the results of their researches. I doubt if Germany itself turns out every year so large a mass of printed matter devoted to historical

investigation or speculation. This matter has a German quality, not unnaturally, for the impulse to this kind of work came largely from the teachers and learned men of the German universities to which American students used to resort. These books and articles are eminently painstaking and accurate, disdaining no facts, however trivial they may seem. Comparatively few large historical works are produced, for the writers are occupied not so much in rearing edifices as in laying foundations, or perhaps in quarrying stones and carrying them to the place where the building is to be erected. They are regardful rather of the substance than of the style and manner of their compositions, and are right in this, for the work is of a class in which accuracy is the one essential thing. Nevertheless, the treatises of Henry C. Lea, most learned of all American historians, and those of Francis Parkman and of John Fiske, were of admirable quality; nor are their successors wanting among living writers, whom I do not mention because selection would be invidious where there are several of conspicuous excellence.

Much of this work relates to local history or State history, and makes its special appeal to citizens of the United States. But much also deals with large constitutional questions and with problems in political science that are of universal interest. Americans have begun to realize that their country is both the workshop and the laboratory of democracy. In their forty-eight States and their Congress they are trying experiments in every form of popular government by which the whole world may profit, and indeed is profiting.

The other field from whose heavy soil a large crop is being raised is the field of economics and of the social sciences in their application to social progress. Here the affinities of American authors are rather with England than with Germany, for the exaggerated doctrines of State omnipotence which German thinkers have (to their own injury) embraced do not commend themselves to English-speaking men nurtured in the principles of liberty. The substantial identity of industrial problems, and social problems generally, in Britain and the United States, as well as the similarity of spirit and aims, has made the experiments and the literature bearing on these subjects especially helpful to both countries.

When one passes from these grave subjects to the greener and gayer meadows of fiction, the change from forty years ago shows itself rather in quality than in quantity. In the seventies few novels of literary merit were appearing in America, cer-

tainly very few that won reputation in Europe, until those who are now illustrious veterans—Mr. W. D. Howells and Mr. Henry James—made themselves known. Isolated works of striking individuality shone out now and then, like the best of Mark Twain's, but there was no such number of really finished and artistic story-tellers as America has to-day, when at least three novelists (besides the veterans just referred to) are admittedly equal to the best of their English competitors. The American novel is now no longer content to depict phases of local life, though that is still effectively done, and the romantic element that has long been associated with the Far West is now so fast fading away that it will soon cease to be available for "local color." But several of the best writers of to-day are grappling with the newer issues of life, in an imaginative way, and in a more "continental" spirit, so to speak, than any of their predecessors. They are less influenced by French models than most of our English writers have been; and in their hands realism does not so much occupy itself with small details. One is now struck by the presence of what European travelers when they return from America used to complain of as wanting there: I mean delicate elaboration in workmanship. This care and finish are now evident not only in fiction, but in literary criticism also. Good criticism is almost as rare both in literature and in art, as good original work; and in the United States there was but little of it in the seventies or eighties, far less than one finds now. I do not know whether some share in this advance may not be due to the example set by the late Mr. Wendell P. Garrison, who was for many years literary editor of the *New York Nation*. He wrote little or nothing in that journal himself; indeed, I am not sure that he ever wrote anything except a biography of his father, William Lloyd Garrison. But he had formed an exceedingly high idea of what literary reviewing ought to be, and in his days the notices of books—especially of books on philosophical or historical subjects—in his weekly were thought by some Englishmen to maintain an average level higher than any British journal then attained. Nor has any monument of critical scholarship applied to a classic been reared in Britain during the last few decades quite comparable to the great Variorum edition of Shakespeare which we owe to the late Dr. Horace Howard Furness of Philadelphia.

It is now more than thirty years since the chief names in poetry were ceasing to write both in America and in Britain; and just as in the latter the places left vacant by the disappear-

ance of Tennyson, Browning, Matthew Arnold, and Swinburne have not been filled, so neither have any successors to Longfellow, Lowell, Emerson, Bryant, Holmes, or Whittier—some might add Whitman—attained an equally conspicuous position. It is not that in either country people care less for poetry—all the verses of merit that appear are eagerly read—but not only these two countries, but the nations of continental Europe also, still await the great geniuses who will doubtless, as after former periods of comparative quiescence, at last swim into the sky.

Two other questions rise to the mind in looking back over these four decades. One of them is, Does American literature show a tendency to centralize itself at any point, as French literature long ago centralized itself in Paris, and as German literature has been tending to do in Berlin? Some might have expected this, seeing how the wonderful development of the railway system and of commerce has drawn America together. There are, however, few, if any, indications of such a process. Boston seems to be less of a literary center than it once was. New York is not conspicuously more of a center, though a larger proportion of authors may now reside there. Yet the tone and spirit of American literature seem to be taking on rather more of a national character as intercourse grows more intimate between all parts of the country, and as the difference between the social and intellectual and even the political conditions of the East, the South, the Middle West, and the Pacific slope are becoming less marked. People seem to think more alike in various parts of the country than they once did, and there is a sort of convergence of tastes and habits. Magazines are sometimes called "the enemies of books," but the leading magazines, now read more widely over all parts of the country than daily newspapers can be, may be playing their part in creating a similarity of tastes all over the continent.

The question may also be put: Are British and American literature drawing closer to each other with the immensely increased personal intercourse of the two peoples and the better knowledge each has of the other? They are doubtless more occupied with the same subjects than they used to be, because the United States is altogether in fuller touch with the Old World. But the distinctive color or flavor, whichever one is to call it, of the New World is still evident. When one opens a book without knowing who the author is or where it is published, there is something not merely in the words or style, but in the

way of thinking, and in the atmosphere (so to speak) which the thoughts breathe, which reveals the author's nationality. This difference between spirit and flavor of the literature of the two peoples seems to me personally less marked than are the differences between their institutions and their respective national characters. Nevertheless, it exists, and it seems likely to continue. That it should continue is much to be desired by those who value individuality and who feel that the ideas and tastes of mankind may some day find themselves in danger of becoming too uniform. The more variety there is, so much the more progress, for variety is stimulating as well as enjoyable.

These are but scattered thoughts, and stand in much need of illustration from concrete instances, which I would give did time and space permit. The developments noted are only a few out of many, nor has it been possible to dwell upon those others that have passed on the quality of work done in the spheres of science and art. But the most remarkable of all the changes seems to be the extraordinary extension and improvement of the higher teaching in the universities. They are at present far more occupied with solid learning and with the study of nature than with what we call "literature" in the narrower sense. But they are creating a vast mass of readers, women no less than men, who love literature and who appreciate art to a far greater extent than the American population did forty years ago, and the results cannot but appear in the literary productivity as well as in the literary taste of the coming generation.

JAMES BRYCE.